THE FACTS

A Yuletide Tayle of Ye Olden Tyme by Ring W. Lardner

THE engagement was broken off before it was announced. So only a thousand or so of the intimate friends and relatives of the parties knew anything about it. What they knew was that there had been an engagement and that there was one no longer. The cause of the breach they merely guessed and most of the guesses were, in most particulars, wrong.

Each intimate and relative had a fragment of the truth. It remained for me to piece the fragments together. It was a difficult job, but I did it. Part of my evidence is hearsay; the major portion is fully corroborated. And not one of my witnesses had anything to gain through perjury.

So I am positive that I have at my tongue's end the facts, and I believe that in justice to everybody concerned, I should make them public.

Ellen McDonald had lived on the north side of Chicago for twenty-one years. Billy Bowen had been a south sider for seven years longer. But neither knew of the other's existence until they met in New York the night before the Army-Navy game.

Billy, sitting with a business acquaintance at a neighboring table in Tonio's, was spotted by a male member of Ellen's party, a Chicagoan, too. He was urged to come on over. He did, and was introduced. The business acquaintance was also urged, came, was introduced and forgotten; forgotten, that is, by every one but the waiter, who observed he danced not nor told stories, and figured that his function must be to pay. The business acquaintance had been Billy's guest. Now he became host, and without seeking the office.

It was not that Billy and Miss McDonald's male friends were niggards. But unfortunately for the b.a., the checks always happened to arrive when everybody else was dancing or in hysterical over Billy's repartee as to be potentially insolvent.

Billy was somewhere between his fourteenth and twenty-first highball; in other words, at his best, from the audience's standpoint. His dialogue was simply screaming and his dancing just heavenly. He was Frank Tinney doubling as Vernon Castle. On the floor he tried and accomplished twinkles that would have spelled catastrophe if attempted under the four-ten mark or over the twenty-one and he said the cutest things—one right after the other.

You can be charmed by a man's dancing, but you can't fall in love with his funniness. If you're going to fall in love with him at all, you'd do it when you catch him in a serious mood.

Miss McDonald caught Billy Bowen but one at the game next day. Entirely by accident or a decree of fate, her party and his sat in adjoining boxes. Not by accident, Miss McDonald sat in the chair that was nearest Billy's. She sat there first to be amused; she stayed to be considered.

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HERE was a different Billy from the Billy of Tonio's. Here was a Billy who trained his gun on your heart and not your risibles alone. Here was a dreamy Billy, a Billy of romance.

How calm he remained through the excitement! How indifferent to the thrills of the game! There was depth to him. He was a man. Her escort and the others round her were children, screaming with delight at the trifle deeds of pseudo heroes. Foot ball was a great sport, but a sport. It wasn't life. Would the world be better or worse for that nine-yard gain by Elephant or Oliphant, or whatever his name was, had just made? Who knew it wouldn't. Billy knew, for Billy was deep. He was making man's thoughts. She could tell by his silence, by his inattention to the scene before him. She scarcely could believe that here was the same person who, last night, had kept his own, yes, and neighboring tables ringing with laughter. What a complex character his!

Forsooth, Mr. Bowen was thinking these thoughts. He was thinking that if this pretty Miss McDowell or Donnelly were elsewhere, he could go to sleep. And that if he could remember which team he had bet on and could tell which team was which, he would have a better idea of whether he was likely to win or lose. Then, after the game, they parted, Billy rallied to the extent of asking permission to call. Ellen, it seemed, would be very glad to have him, but she couldn't tell exactly when she would be back in Chicago; she still had three more places to visit in the east. Could she possibly let him know when she did get back? Yes, she could and would; if he really wanted her to, she would drop him a line. He certainly wanted her to.

This, thought Billy, was the best possible arrangement. Her note would tell him her name and address and save him the trouble of phoning all the McConnells, McDowells and Donnellys on the North Side. He did want to see her again; she was pretty fine, judging from last night, full of fun. And she had fallen for him; he knew it from that last look.

He watched her until she was lost in the crowd. Then he hunted round for his pals and the car that had brought them up. At length he gave up the search and wearily climbed the elevated stairs. His hotel was the Broadway near 44th. He left the car in at 42d, the third time it stopped there.

"I guess you've rode far enough," said the guard. "Fifteen cents' worth is a nickel. I guess we ought to be a Pullman on these here trains."

"I guess," said Billy; "I guess——"

But the repartee well was dry. He trembled downstairs and hurried over toward Broadway to replenish it. Ellen McDonald's three more places to visit in the east must have been awfully dull. Anyway, on the 6th day of December, scarcely more than a week after his parting with her in New York, Billy Bowen received a promised note. It informed him formerly that her name was Ellen McDonald, that she lived at 44-and-so Dalton place and that she was back in Chicago.

That day, if you'll remember, was Monday. Miss McDonald's parents had tickets for the opera. But Ellen was honestly just worn out and would they be mad at her if she stayed home and went to bed? They wouldn't. They would take Aunt Mary in her place.

On Tuesday morning Paul Potter called up and wanted to know if she could go with him that night to "The Follies." She was horribly sorry, but she'd made an engagement. The engagement, evidently, was to be Monday, and the subject was harmony, with Berlin, Kern and Van Alstyne as instructors. She sat on the piano bench from half-past 7 till quarter after 9, and then went to her room, vowing that she would accept no and all invitations for the following evening.

Fortunately, no invitations arrived, and at a quarter of 9 Wednesday night Mr. Bowen did. And in a brand-new mood.

He was a bit shy and tended more than he talked. But when he talked well, though the sparkling wit of the night at Tonio's was lacking. Lacking, too, was the preoccupied air of the day at the foot ball game. There was no problem to keep his mind busy, but even if the Army and Navy had been playing foot ball in this very room, he could have told at a glance which was which. Vision and brain were perfectly clear. And he had been sitting his old eight hours, and, like a railroad hen, sometimes nine and sometimes ten every night since his arrival home from Gotham, N. Y. Mr. Bowen was on the wagon.

They talked of the east, of Tonio's, of the game (this was where Billy lost most of his listening), of the play, of theaters, of books, of college, of automobiles, of the market. They talked, too, of their immediate families. Billy's, consisting of one married sister in South Bend, was soon exhausted. He had two cousins here in town whom he saw frequently, two cousins and their wives, but they were people who simply couldn't stay home nights. As for himself, he preferred his rooms and a good book to the so-called gay life. Ellen should think that a man who danced so well would want to be doing it all the time. It was nice of her to say that he danced well, but really he didn't, you know. Oh, yes, he did. She guessed she could tell. Well, anyway, the giddy whirl made no appeal to him, unless, of course, he was in particularly charming company. His avowed love for home and quiet surprised Ellen a little. It surprised Mr. Bowen a great deal. Only last night, he remembered, he had been driven almost desperate by that quiet of which he was now so fond; he had been on the point of busting loose, but had checked himself in time. He had played Canfield till 10, though the book shelves were groaning with their load.

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ELLEN'S family kept them busy for an hour and a half. It was a dear family and she wished he could meet it. Mother and father were out playing bridge somewhere tonight. Aunt Mary had gone to bed. Aunts Louise and Harriet lived in the next block. Sisters Edith and Wilma would be home from Northampton for the holidays about the 20th. Brother Bob and his wife had built the cutest house! In Evanston. Her younger brother Walter was a case! He was away tonight and had gone out right after dinner. He'd better be in before mother and father came. He had a new love affair every week and sixteen years old last August. Mother and father really didn't care how many girls he was interested in, so long as they kept him too busy to run around with those crazy schoolmates of his. The latter were older than he; just at the age when it seems smart to drink beer and play cards for money. Father said if he ever found out that Walter was doing those things he'd take him out of school and lock him up somewhere.

Aunts Louise and Mary and Harriet did a lot of settlement work. They met all sorts of queer people—people you'd never believe existed. The three aunts were unmarried.

Brother Bob's wife was dear, but absolutely without a sense of humor. Bob was full of fun, but they got along just beautifully together. You never saw a couple so much in love.

Edith was on the basket ball team at college and terribly popular. Wilma was horribly clever and everybody said she'd make Phi Beta Kappa.

Ellen, so she averred, had been just nothing in school; not bright, not athletic, and, of course, not popular.

"Oh, of course not," said Billy, smiling.

"Honestly," fibbed Ellen.

"You never could make me believe it," said Billy. Whereat Ellen blushed and Billy's unbelief strengthened.

At this crisis the Case burst into the room with his hat on. He removed it at sight of the caller and awkwardly advanced to be introduced.

"I'm going to bed," he announced, after the formality.

"I hoped," said Ellen, "you'd tell us about the latest. Who is it now? Beth?"

"Beth nothing!" scoffed the Case. "We split up the day of the Keewatin game."

"What was the matter?" asked his sister.

"I'm going to bed," said the Case. "It's pretty near midnight."

"By George, it is!" exclaimed Billy. "I didn't dream it was that late."

"No," said Walter. "That's what I tell dad—the clock goes along some when you're having a good time."

Billy and Ellen looked shyly at each other and then laughed—laughed harder, it seemed to Walter, than the joke warranted. In fact, he hadn't thought it as a joke. If it was that good he'd spring it on Kathryn tomorrow night. It would just about clinch her.

The Case, carrying out his repeated threat, went to bed and dreamed of Kathryn. Fifteen minutes later Ellen retired to dream of Billy. And an hour later than that Billy was dreaming of Ellen, who had become suddenly popular with him, even if she hadn't been so at Northampton, which he didn't believe.

They saw "The Follies" Friday night. A criticism of the show by either would have been the greatest folly of all. It is doubtful that they could have told what theater they'd been to ten minutes after they'd left it. From wherever it was, they walked to a dancing place and danced. Ellen was so far gone that she failed to note the change in Billy's trotting. Foxes would have blushed for shame at its awkwardness and lack of variety. If Billy was a splendid dancer he certainly did not prove it this night. All he knew or cared to know was that he was with the girl he wanted. And she knew only that she was with Billy, and happy.

On the drive home the usual superfluous words were spoken. They were repeated inside the storm door at Ellen's father's house, while the taxi driver, waiting, wondered audibly why them suckers of explorers beat it to the Pole to freeze when the North Side was so damn handy.

Ellen's father was out of town. So, in the morning, she broke the news to mother and Aunt Mary and then sat down and wrote it to Edith and Wilma. Next she called up Bob's wife in Evanston, and after that she hurried to the next block and sprang it on Aunt Louise Harriet. It was decided that Walter had better not be told. He didn't know how to keep a secret. Walter, therefore, was in ignorance until he got home from school. The only person he confided in the same evening was Kathryn, who was the only person he saw.

Bob and his wife and Aunts Louise and Harriet came to Sunday dinner, but were chased home early in the afternoon. Mr. McDonald was back and Billy was coming to talk to him. It would embarrass Billy to death to find such a crowd in the house. They'd all meet him soon, never fear, and when they met him they'd be crazy about him. Bob and Aunt Mary and mother would like him because he was so bright and said such screaming things, and the rest would like him because he was so well read and sensible and so horribly good-looking.

Billy, I said, was coming to talk to Mr. McDonald. When he came he did very little of the talking. He stated the purpose of his visit, told what business he was in and affirmed his ability to support a wife. Then he assumed the role of audience, while Ellen's father delivered an hour's lecture. The speaker did not express his opinion of Tyrus Cobb or the kaiser, but they were the only subjects he overlooked. Sobriety and industry were words frequently used.

"I don't care," he prevaricated, in conclusion, "how much money a man is making if he is sober and industrious. You attended college, and I presume you did all the fool things college boys do. Some men recover from their college education; others don't. I hope you're one of the former."

The Sunday night supper—just cold scraps, you might say—was partaken of by the happy but embarrassed pair, the trying-to-look-happy and unembarrassed parents, and Aunt Mary. Walter, the Case, was out. He had stayed home the previous evening.

"He'll be here tomorrow night and the rest of the week, or I'll know the reason why," said Mr. McDonald.

"He won't, and I'll tell you the reason why," said Ellen.

"He's a real boy, Sam," put in the real boy's mother. "You can't expect him to stay home every minute."

"I can't expect anything of him," said the father. "You and the girls and Mary here have let him have his own way so long that he's past managing. When I was his age I was in my bed at 9 o'clock."

"Morning or night?" asked Ellen.

Her father scowled. It was evident he could not take a joke, not even a good one.

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AFTER the cold scraps had been ruined Mr. McDonald drew Billy into the smoking room and offered him a cigar. The prospective son-in-law was about to refuse and express a preference for cigarettes, when something told him not to. A moment later he was deeply grateful to the something.

"I smoke three cigars a day," said the oracle, "one after each meal. That amount of smoking will hurt nobody. More than that is too much. I used to smoke to excess, four or five cigars per day and maybe a pipe or two. I found it was affecting my health and I cut down. Thank heaven, no one in my family ever got the cigarette habit; disease, rather. How any sane, clean-minded man can start on those things is beyond me."

"Me, too," agreed Billy, taking the proffered cigar with one hand and making sure, with the other, that his silver pill case was as deep down in his pocket as it would go.

"Cigarettes, gambling and drinking go hand in hand," continued the man of the house. "I wouldn't trust a cigarette fiend with a nickel."

"There are only two or three kinds he could get for that," said Billy.

"What say?" demanded Mr. McDonald, but before Billy was obliged to wriggle out of it, Aunt Mary came in and reminded her brother-in-law that it was nearly church time.

Mr. McDonald and Aunt Mary went to church. Mrs. McDonald pleading weariness, stayed home with "the children." She wanted a chance to get acquainted with this pleasant-faced boy who was going to rob her of one of her five dearest treasures.

The three were no sooner settled in front of the fireplace than Ellen adroitly brought up the subject of auction bridge, knowing that it would relieve Billy of the conversational burden.

"Mother is really quite a shark, aren't you mother?" she said.

"I don't fancy being called a fish," said mother, smiling.

"She's written two books on it, and she and father have won so many prizes that they may have to lease a warehouse. If they'd only play for money, just think how rich we'd all be?"

"The game is fascinating enough without adding to it the excitement and evils of gambling," said Mrs. McDonald.

"It is a fascinating game," agreed Billy.

"It is," said Mrs. McDonald, and away she went.

Before father and Aunt Mary got home from church, Mr. Bowen was a strong disciple in conservativeness in bidding and thoroughly convinced that all the rules he had been taught were dead wrong. He saw the shark's points so quickly, and agreed so wholeheartedly with her arguments that he impressed her as one of the most intelligent young men she had ever talked at. It was too bad it was Sunday night, but some evening soon he must come over for a game.

"I'd like awfully well to read your books," said Billy.

"The first one's usefulness died with the changes in the rules," replied Mrs. McDonald. "But I think I have one of the new ones in the house, and I'll be glad to have you take it."

"I don't like to have you give me your only copy."

"Oh, I believe we have two."

She knew perfectly well that she had two dozen.

Aunt Mary announced that Walter had been seen in church with Kathryn. He had made it his business to be seen. He and the lady had come early and had maneuvered into the third row from the back, on the aisle leading to the McDonald family pew. He had nudged his aunt as she passed on the way to her seat, and she had turned and spoken to him. She could not know that he and Kathryn had "ducked" before the end of the processional.

After reporting favorably on the Case Aunt Mary launched into a description of the service. About seventy had turned out. The music had been good, but not quite as good as in the morning. Mr. Pratt had sung "Fear Ye Not, O Israel," for the offertory. Dr. Gish was still sick and a lay reader had served. She had heard from Allie French that Dr. Gish expected to be out by the middle of the week, and certainly would be able to preach next Sunday morning. The church had been cold at first, but very comfortable finally.

Ellen arose and said she and Billy would go out in the kitchen and make some fudge.

"I was afraid Aunt Mary would bore you to death," she told Billy, when they had kissed for the first time since 5 o'clock. "She just lives for the church, and can talk on no other subject."

"I wouldn't hold that against her," said Billy, charitably.

The fudge was a failure, as it was bound to be, but the Case, who came in just as it was being passed around, was the only one rude enough to say so.

"Is this a new stunt?" he inquired when he had tested it.

"Is what a new stunt?" asked Ellen.

"Using cheese instead of chocolate."

"That will do, Walter," said his father. "You can go to bed."

Walter got up and started for the hall. At the threshold he stopped.

"I don't s'pose there'll be any of that fudge left," he said. "But if there should be, you'd better put it in the mousetrap."

ELLEN MACDONALD AND BILLY BOWEN MET IN NEW YORK THE NIGHT BEFORE THE ARMY-NAVY GAME.

Billy called a taxi and departed soon after Walter's exit. When he got out at his South Side abode, the floor of the tonneau was littered with recent cigarettes.

And that night he dreamed that he was president of the anti-cigarette league; that Dr. Gish was vice president, and that the motto of the organization was "No trump."

Billy Bowen's business took him out of town in the second week in December, and it was not until the 20th that he returned. He had been east, and had ridden home from Buffalo on the same train with Wilma and Edith McDonald. But he didn't know it, and neither did they. They could not be expected to recognize him from Ellen's description — that he was horribly good-looking. The dining-car conductor was all of that.

Ellen had further written them that he (not the dining-car conductor) was a man of many moods—that sometimes he was just nice and deep, and sometimes he was screamingly funny, and sometimes so serious and silent that she was almost afraid of him.

They were wild to see him, and the journey through Ohio and Indiana would not have been half so long in his company. Edith, the athletic, would have reveled in his wit. Wilma would gleefully have fathomed his depths. They would both have been proud to flaunt his looks before the hundreds of their kind aboard the train. Their loss was greater than Billy's, for he, smoking cigarettes as mast as he could light them and playing bridge that would have brought tears of compassion to the shark's eyes, enjoyed the trip, every minute of it.

Ellen and her father were at the station to meet the girls. His arrival on this train had not been heralded, and it added greatly to the hysterics of the occasion.

Wilma and Edith upbraided him for not knowing by instinct who they were. He accused them of recognizing him and purposely avoiding him. Much more of it was pulled in the same light vein, pro and con.

He was permitted at length to depart for his office. On the way he congratulated himself on the improbability of his ever being obliged to play basket ball versus Edith. She must be a wiz in condition. Chances were she'd train down to 195 before the big game. The other one, Wilma, was a splinter, if he ever saw one. You had to keep your eyes peeled or you'd miss her entirely. But suppose you did miss her! What then? If she won her Phi Beta Kappa pin, he thought. It would make her a dandy belt.

These two, he thought, were a misdeal. They should be reshuffled and cut near the middle of the deck. Lots of other funny things he thought about these two.

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JUST before he had left Chicago on this trip, his stenographer had quit him to marry an elevator-starter named Felix Bond. He had phoned one of his cousins and asked him to be on the lookout for a live stenographer who wasn't likely to take the eye of an elevator-starter. The cousin had had one in mind.

Here was her card on Billy's desk when he reached the office. It was not a business card; she had probably run out of them. It was an engraved visiting car, at $3 per hundred. "Miss Violet Moore," the engraved part said. Above was written: Mr. Bowen: Call me up any night after 7. Calumet 2678."

Billy stowed the card in his pocket and plunged into a pile of uninteresting letters.

On the night of the 22d there was a family dinner at McDonald's, and Billy was in on it. At this function he met the rest of them—Bob and his wife, Aunt Harriet and Aunt Louise.

Bob and his wife, despite the former's aleged sense of humor, spooned every time they were contiguous. That they were in love with each other, as Ellen had said, was easy to see. The wherefore was more of a puzle.

Bob's hirsute adornment having been disturbed by his spouse's digits uring one o fthe orgies, he went upstairs ten minutes before dinner time to effect repairs. Mrs. Bob was left alone on the davenport. In performance of his social duties, Billy went over and sat down beside her. She was not, like Miss Muffet, frightened away, but terror or some other field rendered her temporarily dumb. The game Mr. Bowen was making his fifth attempt to pry open a conversation when Bob came back.

To the impartial observer the scene on the davenport appeared harmless enough. There was a generous neutral zone between Billy and Flo, that being an abbreviation of Mrs. Bob's given name, which, as a few may suspect, was Florence. Billy was working hard and his face was flushed with the effort. The flush may have aroused Bob's suspicions. At any rate, he strode across the room, scowling almost audibly, shot a glance at Billy that would have made the kaiser wince, halted magnificently in front of his wife and commanded her to accompany him to the hall.

Billy's flush became ace high. He was about to get up and break a chair when a look from Ellen stopped him. She was at his side before the pair of Bobs had skidded out of the room.

"Please don't mind," she begged. "He's crazy. I forgot to tell you that he's insanely jealous."

"I understood you to say he had a sense of humor."

"It doesn't work where Flo's concerned. If he sees her talking to a man he goes wild."

"With astonishment, probably," said Billy.

"You're a nice boy," said Ellen, irrelevantly.

Dinner was announced and Mr. Bowen was glad to observe that Flo's terrestrial body was still intact. He was glad, too, to note that Bob was no longer frothing. He learned for the first time that the Case and Kathryn were of the party. Mrs. McDonald had wanted to make sure of Walter's presence; hence the presence of his crush.

Kathryn giggled when she was presented to Billy. It made him uncomfortable and he thought for a moment that a couple of studs had fallen out. He soon discovered, however, that the giggle was permanent, just as much a part of Kathryn as her fraction of a nose. He looked forward with new interest to the soup course, but was disappointed to find that she could negotiate it without disturbing the giggle or the linen.

He next centered his attention on Wilma and Edith. Another disappointment was in store. There were as many and as large oysters in Wilma's soup as in any one's. She ate them all, and, so far as appearances went, was the same Wilma. He had expected that Edith would either diet or plunge. But Edith was as prosaic in her consumption of victuals as Ellen, for instance, or Aunt Louise.

He must content himself for the present with Aunt Louise. She was sitting directly opposite, and he had an unobstructed view of the widest part he had ever seen in woman's hair.

YET THE ENGAGEMENT WAS BROKEN OFF BEFORE IT WAS ANNOUNCED.

"Ogden avenue," he said to himself.

Aunt Louise was telling about her experiences and Aunt Harriet's among the heathen of Peoria street.

"You never would dream there were such people!" said she.

"I suppose most of them are foreign born," supposed her brother, who was Mr. McDonald.

"Practically all of them," said Aunt Louise.

Billy wanted to ask her whether she had ever missionaried among the Indians. He thought possibly an attempt to scalp her had failed by a narrow margin.

Between courses Edith worked hard to draw out his predicated comicality, and Wilma worked as hard to make him sound his low notes. Their labors were in vain. He was not sleepy enough to be deep, and he was fourteen highballs shy of comedy.

In disgust, perhaps, at her failure to be amused, the major portion of the misdeal capsized her cocoa just before the close of the meal and drew a frown from her father, whom she could have thrown in ten minutes, straight falls, any style.

"She'll never miss that ounce," thought Billy.

When they got up from the table and started for the living room Mr. Bowen found himself walking beside Aunt Harriet, who had been so silent during dinner that he had all but forgotten her.

"Well, Miss McDonald," he said, "it's certainly a big family, isn't it?"

"Well, young man," said Aunt Harriet, "it ain't no small family, that's sure."

"I should say not," and Billy laughed pleasantly.

"It ain't no small family, either size or numbers," said Aunt Harriet.

"I should say not," repeated Billy.

Walter and his giggling crush intercepted him.

"What do you think of Aunt Harriet's grammar?" demanded Walter, "I didn't notice it," lied Billy.

"No, I s'pose not. Ain't no small family.' I s'pose you didn't notice it. She isn't a real aunt like Aunt Louise and Aunt Mary. She's just an adopted aunt. She kept house for dad and Aunt Louise after their mother died, and when dad got married she just kept on living with Aunt Louise."

"Oh, was Billy's comment, and it brought forth a fresh supply of giggles from Kathryn.

Ellen had already been made aware of Billy's disgusting plans. He had to catch a night train for St. Louis and he would be there all day tomorrow, and he'd be back Friday, but he wouldn't have time to see her, and he'd surely call her up. And Friday afternoon he was going to South Bend to spend Christmas day with his married sister, because it was probably the last Christmas he'd be able to spend with her.

"But I'll hustle home from South Bend Sunday morning," he said. "And don't you dare make any engagement for the afternoon."

"I do wish you could be with us Christmas eve. The tree won't be a bit of fun without you."

"You know I wish I could. But you see how it is."

"I think your sister's mean."

Billy didn't deny it.

"Who all will be here for the tree?" he inquired.

"Just the people we had tonight, except Kathryn and you. Why?

'Oh, nothing," said Billy.

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"LOOK here, sir," said his betrothed. "Don't you do anything foolish. You're not supposed to buy presents for the whole family. Just a little, tiny one for me, if you want to, but you musn't spend much on it. And if you get anything for any one else in this house I'll be mad."

"I'd like the see you mad," said Billy.

"You'd wish you hadn't," Ellen retorted.

When Billy had gone, Ellen returned to the living room and faced the assembled company.

"Well," she said, "now that you've all seen him, what's the verdict?"

The verdict seemed to be unanimously in his favor.

"But," said Bob, "I thought you said he was so screamingly funny."

"Yes," said Edith, "you told me that, too."

"Give him a chance," said Ellen. "Wait till he's in a funny mood. You'll simply die laughing."

It is a compound fracture of the rules to have so important a character as Tommy Richards appear in only one chapter. But remember this isn't a regular story, but a simple statement of what occurred, when it occurred. During chapter four Tommy had been on his way home from the Pacific coast, where business had kept him all fall. His business out there and what he said and did en route to Chicago are collateral.

Tommy had been Billy's pall at college. Tommy's home was in Minnesota, and Billy was his most intimate, practically his only, friend in the so-called metropolis of the middle west. So Tommy, not knowing that Billy had gone to St. Louis, looked forward to a few pleasant hours with him between the time of the coast train's arrival and the Minnesota train's departure.

The coast train reached Chicago about noon. It was Thursday noon, the 23d. Tommy hustled from the station to Billy's office, and there learned of the St. Louis trip. Disappointed, he roamed the streets a while, and at length dropped into the downtown ticket office of his favorite Minnesota road. He was told that everything for the night was sold out. Big Christmas business, Tommy pondered.

"How about tomorrow night?" he inquired.

"I can give you a lower tomorrow night on the six-thirty," replied Leslie Painter, that being the clerk's name.

"I'll take it," said Tommy.

He did so, and the clerk took $10.05.

"I'll see old Bill, after all," said Tommy.

Leslie Painter made no reply.

In the afternoon Tommy sat through a vaudeville show and at night he looped the loop. He retired early, for the next day promised to be a big one.

Billy got in from St. Louis at 7 Friday morning and had been in his office an hour when Tommy appeared. I have no details of the meeting.

At 8:30, Tommy suggested that they'd better go out and hist one.

"Still on it, eh?" said Billy.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I'm off of it."

"Good gracious! For how long?"

"The last day of November."

"Too long! You look sick already."

"I feel great," averred Billy.

"Well, I don't. So come along and bathe in vichy."

On the way "along," Billy told Tommy about Ellen. Tommy's congratulations were physical and jarred Billy from head to heels.

"Good stuff!" cried Tommy so loudly that three pedestrians jumped sideways. "Old Bill hooked! And do you think you're going to celebrate this occasion with water?"

"I think I am," was Billy's firm reply.

"You think you are! What odds?"

"A good lunch against a red-hot."

"You're on!" said Tommy. "And I'm going to be mighty hungry at 1 o'clock."

"You'll be hungry and alone."

"What's the idea? If you've got a lunch date with the future, I'm in on it."

"I haven't," said Billy. "But I'm going to South Bend on the 1:40, and between now and then I have nothing to do but clean up my mail and buy a dozen Christmas presents."

They turned in somewhere.

"Don't you see the girl at all today?" asked Tommy.

"Not today. All I do is call her up."

"Well, then, if you get outside of a couple who'll be hurt? Just for old-time's sake."

"If you need lunch money I'll give it to you."

"No, no. That bet's off."

"It's not off. I won't call it off."

"Suit yourself," said Tommy, graciously.

At 9:30, it was officially decided that Billy had lost the bet. At 12:30 Billy said it was time to pay it.

"I'm not hungry enough," said Tommy.

"Hungry or no hungry," said Billy, "I buy your lunch now or I don't buy it. See? Hungry or no hungry."

"What's the hurry?" asked Tommy.

"I guess you know what's the hurry. Me for South Bend on the 1:40, and I got to go to the office first. Hurry or no hurry."

"Listen to reason, Bill. How are you going to eat lunch, go to the office, buy a dozen Christmas presents and catch the 1:40?"

"Christmas presents! I forgot 'em. What do you think of that? I forgot 'em. Good-night!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Do! What can I do? Send 'em the money instead of the presents, I guess."

"That would be swell stuff."

"Well, what can I do? You got me into this mess. Get me out!"

* * * *

"SURE, I'll get you out if you'll listen to reason!" said Tommy. "Has this 1:40 train got anything on you? Are you under obligations to it? Is the engineer your girl's uncle?"

"I guess you know better than that. I guess you know I'm not engaged to a girl who's got an uncle for an engineer.

"Well, then, what's the next train?"

"That's the boy, Tommy! That fixes it! I'll go on the next train."

"You're sure there is one?" asked Tommy.

"Is one! Say, where do you think South Bend is? In Europe?"

"I wouldn't mind," said Tommy.

"South Bend's only a two-hour run. Where did you think it was? Europe?"

"I don't care where it is. The question is, what's the next train after 1:40?"

"Maybe you think I don't know," said Billy. He called the gentleman with the apron. "What do you know about this, Charley? Here's an old pal of mine who thinks I don't know the time table to South Bend."

"He's mistaken, isn't he?" said Charley.

"Is he mistaken? Say, Charley, if you knew as much as I do about the time table to South Bend you wouldn't be here."

"No, sir," said Charley. "I'd be an announcer over in the station."

"There!" said Billy, triumphantly. "How's that, Tommy? Do I know the time table, or don't I?"

"I guess you do," said Tommy. "But I don't think you ought to have secrets from an old friend."

"There's no secret about it, Charley."

"My name is Tommy," corrected his friend.

"I know that. I know your name as well as my own, better'n my own. I know your name as well as I know the time table."

"If you'd just tell me the time of that train, we'd all be better off."

"I'll tell you, Tommy. I wouldn't hold out anything on you, old boy. It's 5:25."

"You're sure?"

"Sure! Say, I've taken it a hundred times if I've taken it once."

"All right," said Tommy. "That fixes it. We'll go in and have lunch and be through by half-past 1. That'll give you four hours to do your shopping, get to your office and make your train."

"Where you going while I shop?"

"Don't bother about me."

"You go along with me."

"Nothing doing."

"Yes, you do."

"No, I don't."

But this argument was won by Br. Bowen. At ten minutes of 3 when they at last called for the check, Mr. Richards looked on the shopping expedition in an entirely different light. Two hours before it had not appealed to him at all. Now he could think of nothing that would afford more real entertainment. Mr. Richards was at a stage corresponding to Billy's twenty-one. Billy's was far past it.

"What we better do," said Tommy, "is write down a list of all the people, so we won't forget anybody."

"That's stuff!" said Billy. "I'll name 'em, you write 'em."

So Tommy produced a pencil and took dictation on the back of a menu card.

"First, girl's father, Sam'l McDonal'."

"Samuel McDonald," repeated Tommy. "Maybe you'd better give me some dope on each one, so if we're shy of time we can both be buying at once."

"All right," said Billy. First, Sam'l McDonal'. He's an ol' crab. Raves about cig'rettes."

"Like 'em?"

"No. Hates 'em."

"Samuel McDonald, cigarettes," wrote Tommy. "Old crab," he added.

When the important preliminary arrangement had at last been completed the two old college chums went out into the air.

"Where do we shop?" asked Tommy.

"Marsh's," said Billy. "'S only place I got charge account."

"Maybe we better take a taxi and save time," suggested Tommy.

So they waited five minutes for a taxi and were driven to Marsh's, two blocks away.

"We'll start on the first floor and work up," said Tommy, who had evidently appointed himself captain.

They found themselves among the jewelry and silverware.

"You might get something for the girl here," suggested Tommy.

"Don't worry 'bout her," said Billy. "Leave her till las'."

"What's the limit on the others?"

"I don't care," said Billy. "Dollar, two dollars, three dollars."

"Well, come on," said Tommy. "We got to make it snappy."

But Billy hung back.

"Say, ol' boy," he wheedled, "you're my ol'st friend; is that right?"

"That's right," agreed Tommy.

"Well, say, ol' frien', I'm pretty near all in."

"Go home, then, if you want to. I can pull this all right alone."

"Nothin' doin'. But if I could just have lil' nap—ten, fifteen minutes—you could get couple things here on firs' floor and then come get me."

"Where?"

"Third floor waitin' room."

"Go ahead. But wait a minute. Give me some of your cards. And will I have any trouble charging things?"

"Not a bit. Tell 'em you're me."

* * * *

IT was thus that Tommy Richards was left alone in a large store, with Billy Bowen's charge account, Billy Bowen's list and Billy Bowen's cards.

He glanced at the list.

"Samuel McDonald, cigarettes. Old Crab," he read.

He approached a floor-walker.

"Say, old pal," he said, "I'm doing some shopping and I'm in a big hurry. Where'd I find something for an old cigarette fiend?"

"Cigarette cases, two aisles down down and an aisle to your left," said Old Pal.

Tommy raised the limit on the cigarette-case he picked out for Samuel McDonald. It was $4.75.

"I'll cut down somewhere else," he thought. "The father-in-law ought to be favored a little."

"Charge," he said in response to a query. "William Bowen, Bowen & Co., 18 South La Salle. And here's a card for it. That go out tonight sure?"

He looked again at the list.

"Mrs. Samuel McDonald, bridge bug. Miss Harriet McDonald, reverse English. Miss Louise McDonald, thin hair. Miss Mary Carey, church stuff. Bob and wife, The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife and gets mysteriously jealous. Walter McDonald, real kid. Edith, fat lady. Wilma, a splinter."

He consulted Old Pal once more. Old Pal's advice was to go to the third floor and look over the books. The advice proved sound. On the third floor, Tommy found for Mother "The First Principles of Auction Bridge," and for Aunt Harriet an English grammar. He also bumped into a counter laden with hymnals, chant books and books of common prayer.

"Aunt Mary!" he exclaimed. And to the clerk: "How much are your medium prayer books?"

"What denomination?" asked the clerk, whose name was Freda Swanson.

"One or two dollars," said Tommy.

"What church, I mean" inquired Freda.

"How would I know?" said Tommy. "Are there different books for different churches?"

"Sure. Catholic, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran——"

"Let's see. McDonald, Carey. How much are the Catholic ones?"

"Here's one at a dollar and a half. In Latin, too."

"That's it! That'll give her something to work on."

Tommy figured on the back of his list.

"Good work, Tommy!" he thought. "Four and a half under the top limit for those three. Walter's next."

He plunged on Walter. A nice poker set, discovered on the fourth floor, came to five even. Tommy wished he could keep it for himself. He also wished constantly that the woman shoppers had taken a course in dodging. He was almost as badly battered as the day he played guard against the Indians.

"Three left beside the queen herself," he observed. "Lord, no. I forgot Bob and his missus."

He moved downstairs again to the books.

"Have you got 'The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife'?" he queried.

Anna Henderson looked, but could not find it.

"Never mind!" said Tommy. "There's one that'll do."

And he ordered "The Green-eyed Monster" for the cooing doves in Evanston.

"Now," he figured, "there's just Wilma and Edith and Aunt Louise." Once more he started away from the books, but a title caught his eye: "Eat and Grow Thin."

"Great!" exclaimed Tommy. "It'll do for Edith. By George! It'll do for both of 'em. 'Eat' for Wilma, and the 'Grow Thin' for Edith. I guess that's doubling up some! And now for Aunt Louise."

The nearest floorwalker looked, in response to his query, that [illegible] could be found on the second floor.

"I ought to have a switch circuit to take me round," said Tommy, who never had felt better in his life. But the floorwalker did not laugh, possibly because he was tired.

"Have you anything to read on with?" asked the lady in the switch yard.

"No, I haven't."

"Can you give me an idea of the color?"

"What colors have you got?" demanded Tommy.

"Everything there is. I'll show them all to you, if you've got the time."

"Never mind," said Tommy. "What's your favorite color in hair?"

The girl laughed.

"Golden," she said.

"You're satisfied, aren't you?" said Tommy, for the girl had chosen the shade of her own shaggy mane. "All right, make it golden. And a merry Christmas to you."

He forgot to ask the price of switches. He added up the rest and found that the total was $16.25.

"About 75 cents for the hair," he guessed. "That will make it 17 even. I'm some shopper. And all done in an hour and thirteen minutes."

He discovered Billy asleep in the waiting-room and it took him three precious minutes to bring him to.

"Everybody's fixed but the girl herself," he boasted. "I got books for most of 'em."

"Where you been?" asked Billy. "What time is it?"

"You've got about thirty-three minutes to get a present for your lady love and grab your train. You'll have to pass up the office."

"What time is it? Where you been?"

"Don't bother about that. Come on."

On the ride down Billy begged every one in the elevator to tell him the time, but no one seemed to know. Tommy hurried him out of the store and into a taxi.

"There's a flock of stores around the station," said Tommy. "You can find something there for the dame."

But the progress of the cab through the packed downtown streets was painfully slow and the station clock, when at last they got in sight of it, registered 5:17.

"You can't wait!" said Tommy. "Give me some money and tell me what to get."

Billy fumbled clumsily in seven pockets before he located his pocketbook. In it were two fives and a ten.

"I gotta have a feevee," he said.

"All right. I'll get something for fifteen. What'll it be?"

"Make it a wris' watch."

"Sure she has none?"

"She's got one. This's for other wris'."

"I used your last card. Have you got another?"

"Pocketbook," said Billy.

* * * *

TOMMY hastily searched and found a card. He pushed Billy toward the station entrance.

"Good-by and Merry Christmas," said Tommy.

"Goo'-by, and God bless you," said Billy, but he was talking to a large policeman.

"Where are you trying to go?" asked the latter.

"Souse Ben'," said Billy.

"Hurry up, then. You've only got a minute.

The minute and six more were spent in the purchase of a ticket. And when Billy reached the gate, the 5:25 had gone and the 5.30 was about to chase it.

"Where to?" inquired the gateman.

"Sou